Ltr Shanker

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WASHINGTON FOCUS: The Supreme Court agreed earlier this week to decide if a local school board violated the rights of a Michigan biology instructor who was suspended for teaching about human reproduction in a seventh-grade life science class. The teacher was awarded just over $300,000 in compensatory and punitive damages when a lower court found that the board had violated his rights of free speech and due process. The case is one of several education-related issues on which the Court will rule this session. A decision is also expected in Wygant v. Jackson (Mich.), where the issue is whether local school boards have the right to maintain a racial percentage of teachers on staff -- at the expense of seniority rights -- during teacher layoffs. Litigation here was initiated by several white teachers in the district who challenged terms of a collective bargaining agreement between the school board and the teacher union, and the National School Boards Association has already filed an amicus curiae brief supporting the Jackson board's position. (See Teacher Education Reports, Aug. 29) Free speech is at issue meanwhile in Bethel School District v. Fraser. Here the justices are being asked to decide if the school district violated the rights of a Tacoma, Wash., student who was suspended after delivering a sexually suggestive speech to a student assembly. Another case that is attracting widespread attention centers on the conflict between academic independence and student rights. The Court has already heard arguments in Regents University of Michigan v. Ewing, an equal protection case focusing on whether university officials violated a student's rights when they expelled him. This case is expected to have far-reaching implications, since the issue really is what role, if any, courts should play in settling academic disputes.

MAJOR STORIES IN THIS ISSUE

SHANKER URGES SCHOOLS TO ABANDON CENTURY-OLD STRUCTURE

In this second part of an exclusive three-part interview with Teacher Education Reports Publisher Emily Feistritzer, American Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker talks further about the need to restructure our public schools and discusses the role of the teacher union today.

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Q. YOU ARE SAYING THAT WE NEED TO DEVELOP SOME INTELLECTUAL MODELS TO COPE WITH WAYS OF RESTRUCTURING SCHOOLS SO THAT QUALITY WILL NOT FALL PREY TO SHORTAGES. WHERE WOULD THESE MODELS COME FROM?

...What we need to do is to bring together some people who have some stake in public education and who have a commitment to the excellence movement and who have an awareness that given the time, demographics and economics that we're not going to do it by trying to get 15,500 different school districts to go out there and recruit their teachers. If there is a problem, and if you bring a group of people with those commitments together, and if they realize -- which I think they would very quickly -- that you need new models, then I think they'd come up with something. And then the question would be do those models work. You've got to try them in a number of places.

Q. DO YOU THINK THIS WILL HAPPEN IN TIME TO MEET THE UPCOMING DEMAND?

Not on a national basis, but it might very well be that over the next two years such groups will meet and establish such models and that two, three, four years from now that a number of those models are injected and we watch them a couple of years after that, then it might very well be that as we get to the sixth, seventh and eighth year where we will have probably lowered standards pretty substantially, it may be by that time we will be willing to change direction and to find a way of maintaining standards and delivering education in a new way. If you think of it, almost every other institution in our society -- whether it's hospitals or drug stores or supermarkets -- they don't really remember what they were like 100 years ago. But a school 100 years ago was pretty much like a school today. They may have a little larger class or a little smaller class, but the resistance -- the insistence -- that for 200 years it has to be done in exactly that same way -- whether or not you can find enough people to do it that way -- especially with all the unhappiness. Unhappiness on the part of parents, the general public, school management and teachers. ... There's no one saying that this is the perfect way to do it.

Q. I THINK THERE'S AN ADDED CONCERN WHEN YOU LOOK AT THE CHANGE IN DEMOGRAPHICS IN THE STUDENT POPULATION AND IF YOU'RE SAYING THAT WE'RE GOING TO LOWER STANDARDS TO MEET THIS BODY DEMAND -- A TEACHER IN FRONT OF THE CLASSROOM -- DON'T YOU THINK WE RUN A TERRIFIC RISK OF EVEN GREATER DIVISIVENESS BETWEEN THE HAVE'S AND HAVE NOT'S. THE HAVE'S MOVING INTO PRIVATE SCHOOLS, AND JUST BOWING OUT OF PUBLIC EDUCATION?

Sure I think you're right. I think to some extent it's just an exacerbation of the current problem. Is there any doubt that the wealthy ... districts of this country have gotten more than their fair share of the best teachers in this country and that the schools who are in those areas that are economically the poorest and have the greatest problems have a greater number of teachers who stay for a short time and leave? They have a share of outstanding, dedicated people, but it's a lot smaller. That's not new, except that in a period of shortage it becomes worse.

Q. I WANT TO ASK ONE FINAL QUESTION ABOUT TURNING AROUND 200 YEARS OF AMERICAN EDUCATION. IF YOU COULD SAY HOW THIS COULD BE DONE IN A REASONABLE AMOUNT OF TIME -- LET'S SAY THE NEXT THREE YEARS -- WHERE DO YOU THINK WE OUGHT TO START? WITH DISCUSSION?

I don't think you can do it in three years. Yeah, I think you need the discussion and with the discussion probably I think you could involve the different groups that would need to be involved and expect to come out with

some models that have substantial amount of rudimentary agreement if not consensus. And that process would take at least a year. That's optimistic, but let's assume that everyone has a sense that time is working against them. So by the end of the year, they've got two or three or four ideas of what could be tried. Then you need a year to shop around for school districts and superintendents and teachers that are willing to try something that's new. That won't be easy, but that's another year. Then again on the most optimistic timetable in your third and fourth years -- because you'd want to look at something at least over a two-year period and maybe over a three-year period -- the third, fourth and fifth year you would have a certain number of schools operating on a totally different way. And at the end of that period ... you'd be able to see if you had something you could get to operate.

Q. WHO DO YOU THINK SHOULD INITIATE THIS PROCESS? THE GOVERNMENT?

I think that bringing people together without the assumption that they're going to finance anything, but simply for their ideas and their thinking would certainly not be a bad thing for the federal government to do. You know if we were to insist that teachers in the United States come only from the upper half of those who graduate college, we would have to take 50 percent of that upper half. And that's competing with all the doctors, lawyers, actuaries, dentists, etc. Well we're not going to get that. There is no way we are going to take 50 percent of that talent. So if we decide that we're not going to take people from the top half, we're looking at people from the bottom half of college graduates or the bottom quarter. And if we're going to get most of our people from the bottom, then how do we keep a percentage from the top in our schools, and how do we get them to work with the others, as we begin to talk in terms of how to restructure? The missing ingredient in the whole excellence and reform movement is that we have a bunch of goals now that are nationally, generally agreed to. It's amazing. Every national poll now says that's what people want. They're even willing to accept those goals if their own kids flunk the test and if their own kids drop out and are discouraged, and even if they have to pay more money. Marvelous! In a very difficult area that is filled with a lot of differences on values, we've reached a national consensus on what we want in education. Now the next step is that some hard-nosed, tough character has to get up and say, 'But look these are slogans. We cannot get 1.8 million people from the kind that are described as being needed in all these booklets, because they aren't going to be there and because other people need them too.' Now without changing goals, what we want to do for our students and what it is we want to demand from adults, how do we change the structure of this thing essentially, so that we can maintain it.

Q. I AM GOING TO SHIFT TO SOME OTHER THINGS. HOW WOULD YOU COMPARE THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER UNION TODAY VERSUS AS RECENTLY AS FIVE YEARS AGO?

Five years ago I'd say that with the exception of a certain number of professional conferences and things like that that our role -- I won't speak for the NEA -- that our role was 98 percent in the collective bargaining area. And I'd say that it's now shifted to a place where the whole area of policy and of professional development is more than 50 percent. Not that we've abandoned collective bargaining, but that's become more of a safety net. The thing that you do to hold on to what you have and, if you can, in the good times it will get better. But I know that our resources and the people that we add to our staff and our conferences and our publications ... it's shifted to issues of professionalism and quality. And essentially the things that go beyond the narrow scope of collective bargaining to the broader issues -- from the teacher's point of view you can call them quality of worklife issues. It's been a remarkable -- a very rapid shift.

Q. HAVE YOU FOUND THAT THE TEACHERS ARE PLEASED WITH THAT?

They are. ... In fact quite a few have come up and said well, 'Thank God you've opened up the issues. We always thought about them, but we thought we'd be viewed as traitors if we mentioned them. Or that management might take advantage of them. Or that we'd be breaking ranks or breaking solidarity if we even mentioned these things. But we've been thinking about them for a long time, and we've been concerned.' Also, when we first got into collective bargaining in the early, early 1960's and we went around to teachers and collected all the things that they wanted us to do through collective bargaining, it was a very extensive list. I remember my first bargaining in New York City, we must have had about 850 to 900 items. Most of them turned out to be items that were not negotiable in collective bargaining. ... One of the things that teachers have always felt is that new teachers ought to have an internship. But that's not the kind of thing you negotiate. It's not a working condition. It's not a salary item. Legally no one has to talk to them about it in the collective bargaining process. So initially when teachers went to collective bargaining, they saw it as a vehicle that would deal with all of their professional and employee concerns. Then over the years they saw that the process is fairly narrow and it deals basically with economic issues, and that it excluded some of the broader issues. What's happening now is that we're saying all right, if we can't do it through traditional collective bargaining, then let's find another way that we can do it with all these issues that matter to us very much.

Q. ON THE ISSUE OF SALARIES FOR TEACHERS, I THINK THE DATA ARE MIXED. IF YOU LOOK AT WHAT THE PUBLIC SAID IN THAT GALLUP POLL NEA RELEASED THIS SUMMER THAT ASKED, 'WHAT DO YOU THINK TEACHERS OUGHT TO GET PAID?' THEY SAID 'SUCH AND SUCH' FOR ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY WITH 15 YEARS EXPERIENCE, AND WHEN I ANALYZED THE DATA ON TEACHER SALARIES, IT COMES OUT TO BE ABOUT THAT. WHERE DO YOU THINK WE STAND ON SALARIES?

Well what the public thinks is very important, but it's really not what matters. What matters is the market. And what salaries ought to be is what is sufficient to get people who meet the standards that we've decided on. And the fact is that we're not meeting people of those standards. First of all the standards are too low. You have tests all over the country where you have elementary teachers who get one out of every three sixth-grade arithmetic questions wrong. About sixty-five percent are passing a sixth-grade arithmetic test. That's a ridiculously low standard. And then we have to hire uncertified people, because we don't have enough people coming forward who can meet that standard. Now I don't know what the salary would have to be. It might be different for different subjects. It might be different at different times for different subjects. ... But the problem is that we don't even have a good reporting scheme. There ought to be a requirement to... We have warnings on different foods, cigarettes, so forth that this may be dangerous to your health. Suppose that we required that every school that puts a teacher in a classroom that isn't certified, that a letter has to go to the parents and the parents have to sign.... This is a neo-Hatch Act. A parent has to give permission to have a noncertified teacher teach their child. Or if you have an English teacher or a history teacher in the classroom teaching math, then a letter goes home to the parent saying, 'Mr. and Mrs. Smith, We want you to know that your Mary is getting her math taught to her by a social studies teacher this year. We require you give permission.' ... You're requiring students to take the subject -- that's reform. And you're requiring teachers to be tested. All that's fine. And then you say that you've hired a social studies teacher but you can't find a math teacher, so you'll have the social studies teacher teach math. Or you can go out and hire somebody who hasn't been able to pass the test at all. So

the salary question has nothing to do with what people think teachers ought to get, and it has nothing to do with what teachers think teachers ought to get. It has to do with what kind of a person do you want as a teacher. What do you want them to know? And how good do you want them to be at it? And once you've decided what that standard is, then you can go out and advertise. And if you can get them at low salaries, great. And if you have to go higher, fine. But the salaries are whatever it takes to get those people. That's what it ought to be. I think the fact that polls even ask questions about that shows a total lack of understanding. Do you have a poll about what you think doctors ought to get or a lawyer or a plumber. When you're plumbing is broken, you're going to call a plumber. You may not think it's just what he charges.

TREND TOWARD STATE-MANDATED COURSE REQUIREMENTS COULD HELP FUEL TEACHER SHORTAGE

A new report that examines both the positive and negative aspects of state-mandated school reform charges that "a certain scorn for teachers has been implicit in the excellence movement as a whole," and warns that "the punitive spirit (that) seems to pervade many of the proposed changes" could severely undermine teacher morale.

The study, With Consequences for All from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, goes on to say that "top-down" efforts to beef up secondary school requirements have led some states to define distribution requirements so narrowly as "to create a virtually uniform statewide curriculum." It continues, "This sharp curtailment of ... professional latitude not only restricts a teacher's ability to adjust the curriculum to allow for students' differences, but it limits the exercise of teachers' professional judgment."

Warning that robbing teachers of classroom discretion constitutes "another body blow" to their professional status, the report declares, "In a time of impending ... shortages, actions that make teaching an increasingly frustrating career will surely complicate the recruitment of qualified teachers."

CONSENSUS ON TEACHING REFORMS COULD BE LOST IN DIVERSITY OF APPROACHES

A cross-section of individuals deeply involved in reforming the way we train and certify our teachers shared their plans and proposals earlier this month at a national "Summit Meeting on Teacher Education and Certification," sponsored by the Department of Education, the National Center for Education Information (NCEI) and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI).

The 36 invited participants put forth and discussed a potpourri of initiatives and ideas that ran the gamut from plans to develop a national certification program to a clarion call for a major restructuring of our entire school system.

Robert Saunders, president of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) told his colleagues that the Association has appointed "a blue ribbon commission to develop a national certification program," and he added that this body would be "working to develop new models and to develop alternative ways to certification."

Noting that AACTE had opposed the New Jersey plan for alternative certification "because it feared insufficient attention would be paid to the knowledge base," he expressed support for nontraditional routes to certification "provided the knowledge base is not compromised."

Dr. Leo Klagholz, director of New Jersey's Office of Teacher Preparation, was there to offer an in depth report on his state's foray into alternative certification, and he asserted, "We were certifying mediocrity and screening out college professors and other talented people." He added that the plan received further impetus from the "embarassment of the emergency certificate that said anybody could come in without qualifications." He declared, "We were systematically screening out quality and keeping mediocrity on the basis of course work."

The participants were generally well disposed to statements from American Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker who presented his case for a major restructuring of the nation's schools. (See interview, p. 1 and Teacher Education Reports, Oct. 10) He called for a total rethinking of the content of teacher training programs and urged state officials to "start with zero" and then require that everything made part of a teacher training program be justified.

Robert Altman, vice president of the Educational Testing Service, summed up much of the discussion when he stated, "There is a fair amount of agreement on where we want to go, but uncertainty as to how to get there."

NCEI Director Emily Feistritzer agreed with Altman's assessment concerning the lack of consensus on how best to achieve reform, and she decried the emphasis on structure -- for example, debates over six- and five-year programs versus undergraduate programs -- as overshadowing the far more urgent question of content which she described as "being lost in the process."

While several groups and institutions are grappling with reform efforts in teacher education and certification, the diversity is enormous and as Feistritzer noted "very bothersome."

Her conclusions were echoed in part by Education Secretary William J. Bennett who noted that the "cacophony" of ideas and opinions about teaching reform is confusing the public, and he called for a system of licensing and certification that recognizes the reality that "people's classroom readiness varies dramatically."

Assistant Secretary for Educational Research and Improvement Chester E. Finn Jr. also had a message for the participants. Noting the array of changes and experiments now underway, he warned, "A great many of us are discontented with the sum total of these activities."

In addition to those already mentioned, persons participating in the "Summit" were: Lucille Almond, teacher, Charlottesville (Va.) High School; Lewis Branscomb, vice president, IBM Corporation; Denis P. Doyle, AEI's director of education policy studies; Eva Galambos, research associate, Southern Regional Educational Board; Jack Gordon, Florida state senator; Patricia Graham, dean, Harvard Graduate School of Education; Peter Greer, superintendent, Portland (Me.) Public Schools; Michael Hickey, superintendent, Howard County (Md.) Public Schools; Ruth Hobbs, teacher, Alexandria (Ala.) High School.